

# German domestic policy under Kaiser Wilhelm II 1890 -1914

## (Influence of the Military on Foreign Affairs)

### Chancellor Caprivi (1890 - 94)

More moderate than Bismarck: stopped bribery of the press and introduced factory legislation.

### Chancellor Hohenlohe (1894 - 1900)

Often ignored by the Kaiser. Turning point came in 1897 when the Kaiser took complete control of policy, rather than just interfering in the plans of the men in office. Hereafter the Kaiser, with Tirpitz and Bulow, could pursue **Weltpolitik**, which was to lead to disaster.

The creeds of **Imperialism** and **Racialism** became respectable. The superiority of the Aryan race - ideas came from Biology. There was a new strident **Nationalism** coming from politicians, professors, journalists and various pressure groups - **Colonial Society** (founded 1882), **Pan-German League** (f. 1890), **Navy League** (f. 1898).

The most important of these was the **Pan-German League** which the longest lasting and the most influential. By 1914 it had 60 members in the Reichstag (mainly National Liberals). Its aims were to increase patriotism and to promote German culture and colonies abroad. It wanted a fair share of colonies for Germany (Britain and France were felt to have an unfair share). It created distrust among the other nations - especially the remarks of Kaiser and von Bulow - "Germany demands her place in the sun" (von Bulow) and the Kaiser "Germany from a European Empire has become a World Empire". The League also wanted a "Grossdeutschland" - the union of Germany and the German parts of Austria-Hungary (Austria itself and Bohemia). The League also supported the views of the early 19th. century writer Ernst Arndt for the union of the Swiss, Belgian and the Dutch peoples with Germany.

**The Navy League** had 1 million members and was patronised by the government and Krupps, the giant armaments firm. It was an example of a state-directed propaganda machine to educate the people into the idea of a new Navy Law (Tirpitz and the Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900).

### Chancellor von Bulow (1900 - 09)

Had been Foreign Secretary since 1897. Bombastic and dramatic. A sycophant of the Kaiser. His career was to be ended by the Kaiser's "Daily Telegraph" interview of 1908.

### Chancellor Bethmann-Hollwegg (1909 - 17)

Earnest and conscientious. Aware of the limits of his power as the Kaiser's appointee and yet still needing the support of the Reichstag. The sham-constitutionalism continued despite his attempts to liberalise the franchise. The Reichstag failed, despite considerable pressure, to make any real constitutional gains - the Reichstag remained a "demi-parliament".

The old German ruling classes still ruled, content to support a poseur like Wilhelm II, since an authoritarian monarchy provided an indispensable shield for their class privilege against the socialists. For some reason the middle classes remained convinced of the need for a strong monarchy. The growth of Socialism meant that a solution to the sham-constitutionalism could not be put off indefinitely. However it was to take the First World War to bring change.

**Influence of the Army.** Germany's entry into WWI was caused by the uneasy relationship between the civil and military authorities in Germany. The Head of General Staff was ranked as an equal as an advisor to the Kaiser. Also, Wilhelm II detached the Naval High Command from the Imperial Admiralty and placed it under his direct command. This benefited Tirpitz (Chief of Staff to the Naval High Command) - he became the Minister of Marine and this gave the Kaiser much greater control over the navy.

The Kaiser's policy of reducing civilian control of the armed forces widened the breach between the army and a large section of the public. The Army pursued an independent line in matters of high policy - e.g. von Schlieffen, who became Chief of General Staff in 1891, introduced the Schlieffen Plan, which was a reversal of all Germany's previous plans for war in which she was to hit Russia first. The plan was also a dangerous one which required the invasion of Belgium and Luxembourg. However, no politician dare object to it, as this would have been interfering in something outside their sphere. Also, in 1909, the German High Command promised aid to Austria-Hungary under any circumstances - which was to change the whole nature of the Dual Alliance and was to make Austria-Hungary a lot more aggressive in the Balkans and thus contribute to the outbreak of the First World War.

Ritter said "**The German tragedy lay in the constitutional deformation which gave the army primacy in Germany**".

Germany was a state of soldiers and war, rather than one of citizens and law. The army not only remained independent of any control other than the Kaiser's, but due to the prolonged and universal military service, it was able to influence the thinking of the greater part of the German nation. German society was one in which the upper class was soaked in the ethos of military training, and social distinction was measured entirely by military rank. The military were allowed to interfere in diplomacy and were allowed to subordinate the whole of national life to military timetables.